

From Death, Life!
John 20:1-17
Easter Sunday, April 14, 1968

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The best articulation of the Easter Gospel I have ever experienced was short, to the point and included very few words. It came over the television screen in the last few minutes of the documentary: "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich". The editors and compilers of the massive amount of information that went into that document must have pondered long hours before deciding on a fitting conclusion. They chose wisely, I believe, for what they decided to show included a very lucid proclamation of the Easter message. Having probed the depths of Nazi terror, having investigated every aspect of that ghastly era, having brought into our living rooms piles of corpses and gas chambers and ovens, the searching eye of the camera finally came to rest on a barrack wall in the concentration camp at Treblinka. It was known as the "childrens' camp". Through its gates came 15,000 young Jewish children, boys and girls. One can imagine their playful glee - their excitement at a new adventure. Nearly 12,000 of them were executed there. And on the walls the camera discovered evidence of their being - pictures, carefully drawn in idle hours, pictures of butterflies and birds, flowers, little girls jumping rope, houses and beds, the sun and moon, things which matter a great deal to little people. As I watched that with eyes suddenly brimming, I thought I had never seen anything so heart-rending in my life, so utterly and absolutely sad. And yet there was a majesty in it, an irrepressible joy that transformed this image of meaningless death into a parable of hope.

There was more of the truth about man and God and the world in those scribbled pictures of butterflies, than in all the horrors of the gas chambers.

In the midst of death life. That is the kind of world it is. Things like those pictures on the wall keep happening. No dream is ever lost: no childish innocence destroyed, no laughter drowned out, no effort wasted. It's that kind of world because on this day Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Life is full of Easter parables, little bits and pieces of the glorious truth of this day. One of them was played out before our eyes in the life and death of Martin Luther King. He was truly a free man: a man free from the fear of death that stalks our thinking, free from all the stuffy pressures and tensions that fill up our days; free to give his life to a great and noble cause. The source of that freedom was simply the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Another one is the story of William Stringfellow, a brilliant lawyer who has given his life to the poor and disinherited, while becoming one of the most quoted theological thinkers in our day. Wm. Stringfellow, in the prime of middle age, is dying of cancer and has yet to even slow his pace of living and giving. And his books are filled with the kind of exuberant freedom that comes from knowing that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is a reality. In his book, A Private and Public Faith, he begins a very articulate statement on death - with the simple sentence "Now I am certain of the Resurrection", and from that certainty has come a life of significant contribution to his nation and his church.

You see, all of these are Easter sermons, even though the empty tomb is not mentioned, because they direct our attention to the fact that Jesus Christ is not a beloved memory, but an active presence in the world: and that all the forces of the world - the gas chambers of Treblinka, the assassin's bullet in Memphis, the ravages of cancer do not have the final word about human life - he does. That is the good news of this day.

The great temptation on Easter, of course, is to try to prove or explain what happened to the lifeless body of Jesus of Nazareth. The Christian claim is that on the third day he arose, and in our generation that claim sounds so utterly fantastic that our immediate reflex is to defend it with some irrefutable logic, and to explain it in terms which the rational neutrality of 20th century man can digest. The "proofs" of the Resurrection are paraded today and they sound something like this. The Church has existed for 20 centuries, and no institution founded on a lie could exist that long. The disciples, 11 disappointed, depressed individuals, were somehow transformed

into courageous warriors who went out and conquered the world. Nothing could have done that but an authentic encounter with the Risen Lord. And finally the Bible says it happened, so it happened.

These are strong, but not infallible arguments. The truth is that you cannot prove conclusively that the Resurrection happened, any more than you can prove conclusively that you love your husband or wife. The record itself tells the story in four different idioms, each unique and separate. In fact, the New Testament spends precious little time describing perceptible events of Easter morning. What really mattered, in the minds of those who wrote it down, were the implications and the effects it had on the lives of men who were grasped by it.

It is a day also to parade all the possible explanations of what happened: to reduce the fantastic claim to some simple common denominator that offends the rationality of no one. "It's poetry - using the language of symbolism. Jesus really didn't walk away from that tomb. But his words and teachings live on." Another tack is the medical aspect: "He was given a hallucinogenic drug instead of wine, and was in a trance for three days: or - the strain of crucifixion rendered him unconscious, but he revived in the cool of the tomb."

But the New Testament is strangely silent regarding any explanations of how it happened. It does not attempt to dramatize those cataclysmic moments when the stone rolled away and the dead figure stood up - a tempting literary challenge to any man with a fertile imagination! All it does - time and time again - is proclaim that it happened: that Jesus Christ is not dead - but alive. And it is with that proclamation that any serious reader of the New Testament must ultimately come to terms.

At this point I gladly yield to the man, whose book (Interpreting the Resurrection) I have been reading, Doctor Neville Clark, of Oxford University, who put it this way: "....the Resurrection is not a miraculous happening in the dead past, the historic construct of which might be helpfully presented to the sight of any uncommitted observer in order to elicit faith. Apart from faith in the Risen Christ, the Resurrection cannot be known." (p. 104)

Now, if this is true, and I believe it is; if faith in the living Christ is necessary before the Resurrection makes any sense, how in the world are we to talk and think meaningfully about it? That, of course, is the problem of anyone who would stand up on this day and proclaim the Resurrection, and my suggestion is that we go back to that small group of men to whom it all happened. Peter - the brash, unthinking spokesman; Thomas the skeptic, Matthew the crooked tax collector; Judas the betrayer. They spent three years by his side and the New Testament is quite clear that they never really understood him. They wanted him to be Lord and Savior but on their terms. They put an uncertain faith in him and when he was arrested and tried their faith evaporated as quickly as they made their physical exit. When he died, their faith turned to despair. Up against the power of Rome - the real power of the world - he was defenseless. Confronted with death - he did what every other man does: he died. And those who could muster their courage prepared the body in the customary manner, anointing it with preservative oils and wrapping it tightly in linen. One of the subtle facets of the New Testament account is that not one of the persons around him believed he would return from death.

The picture here is one of despair and pessimism; a final, terrible realization that there was no hope. In the crucifixion of Jesus, their master, the disciples stood on the edge of a great abyss, over which no amount of prayer and faith could build a bridge. It was all over. He was dead.

And then, after faith had fled in the face of despair, the Resurrection broke in on them. The picture the New Testament portrays is not one of ill naive, superstitious ignoramuses, but men broken by perplexity, doubt and unbelief who believed in spite of themselves. It was as if the Resurrection forced itself upon them until they had no alternative but to believe it, and live it and celebrate it for as long as they lived.

I believe you and I have to take that same road. I believe, if you and I are going to appropriate, for ourselves, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have to struggle with it logically a thousand times, discard it as nonsense a thousand times and live a while in the valley of despair. I don't believe God grants a full and rich faith to a man as his birth-right. I believe he demands that we stand where the disciples stood - at the foot of the Cross - looking honestly and squarely at all the ugliness of life, all the senseless tragedy, all the injustice and irrational forces that seem to rule the day. I believe God requires that we face the reality of death a few times, shorn of our faith, without comfort and assurance. Because that is what they did. I believe God requires that we take cognizance of the fact that Jesus, his Son, did not die of old age, nor even of disease, but that a mindless coalition of selfish, scheming men put him to death. I believe God requires that we live with that for a while, and the accompanying realization that life is like that, and that there is nothing in life we can do about it.

And then I believe the Resurrection of Jesus Christ bursts gloriously in upon us, just as the Risen Lord appeared suddenly in their despairing midst. I don't think it comes easily. I don't think it can come to the superficial man who spends his days avoiding the unpleasant realities of life. I don't think it ever comes to the man who tries to believe a "home-made faith". I believe it happens when we surrender: when we finally, in despair and dejection, throw ourselves on the mercy of God, when we realize that within us there are no answers. Then it happens: then the reality of the Resurrection grips us, and we can begin to see it in things like pictures on a concentration camp wall.

And then the implications of this fantastic reality begin to work their way into our lives. We see, perhaps for the first time, that life is worth living, that things like courage and honesty and love and humility do make sense. That needs saying today. For at times it appears that there is no justice at all, that the forces of good are powerless before the forces of evil. But to know the reality of the Resurrection is to know that the forces of evil, the forces that combined to crucify Jesus Christ didn't have the last word. He did. He defeated them, and wrote in the nature of the universe the eternal truth that the most powerful forces in all the world are life and love. That needs saying and believing today.

And finally death - given all our worrying about the world, the bomb, the riots, the war, what really concerns us most is the fact of our own inevitable death. Wouldn't it be blessed to be free of that? Wouldn't it be beautiful to live in that kind of freedom? Well that is exactly what Easter is all about. From death, life! The grave is not the end. Death does not speak the final word. God does.

And again I yield to Neville Clark, who has said it far more beautifully than I could hope to: "The unfinished tasks we have tried to do, the dreams and hopes and aspirations after which we have striven, the relationships we have vainly sought to perfect and complete, the experiences that have lifted us up and laid us low, moulded us and made us - all these will not be lost or left behind, but will be the notes by which we render harmony to the music of the City of God." (Ibid p. 114)

How to conclude? Simply, I believe. Like the town crier calling in the night, the message of Easter is this: "All is well". And as Christians we hear that message, not in easy optimism that pretends that all is well anyway: but in a blunt realism that acknowledges that there is much that is not well. But the cry has been shouted: Love is the victor! God reigns! Death is not the end! From Death, Life!

All is well. Christ our Lord has Risen.

Amen.